

House Committee on Agriculture and Forestry

Comments on H.581

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I am commenting on this bill as both a planner and as a professional whose early career was heavily focused on agricultural economic development and sustainable agriculture policy. Prior to my service to the Windham Regional Commission beginning in 2010, I was the founder and executive director of the Baton Rouge Economic and Agricultural Development Alliance, the federal policy coordinator for the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture on the 2002 Farm Bill, Director of Agricultural Economic Development as part of my role as Deputy Commissioner of Planning for Orange County, New York, and as a representative for Calvert County, Maryland on the Southern Maryland Agricultural Development Council in my role as Deputy Director of Calvert County Planning and Zoning. I have also served on the boards of the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, the Louisiana Organic Association, the Policy Task Force of the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, the Louisiana Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, the Louisiana Vegetable Growers Association, and the Capital Area Resource Conservation and Development Office, and I have served as a proposal reviewer for the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program and the USDA Farmers Market Nutrition Program.

In the interest of time, I have added comments to those submitted by Two Rivers-Ottawaquechee Director of Planning, Kevin Geiger. I concur with almost all of his comments, and depart only on his proposed limitation of “as of right” accessory on farm businesses on paved roads. I’ll explain my departure in a moment, but should note here that given my agricultural economic development background, I may perhaps be more inclined to prioritize farm economic viability over potential land use conflict concerns because of the many values that farms provide as is reflected in Vermont policies. That being said, I have had the experience of administering and enforcing zoning, and directly addressing conflicts between farmers and neighbors, as zoning officer in Calvert County, and in my role in Orange County. I appreciate the challenge of what you’re trying to do and the issues that confront local government.

I believe the larger policy issue is what can be done to ensure farms remain as farms, and that farmers can stay on the land. Our farmer population is rapidly aging, and profitability, especially in dairy, is challenging to put it lightly. The pressure to sell in order to retire, to stop accruing debt and to pay off debt, and to take advantage of increasing land prices, is growing. All Vermonters have a stake in farm economic

viability. To be sure farms contribute to the character of Vermont's landscape, but they also contribute to food security, preservation of invaluable agricultural soils, water quality (as an alternative to conversion to residential or commercial use), carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas mitigation, habitat preservation and creation, and critically, a source of income for rural Vermonters. Policy should recognize the unique nature of the business of farming, as well as the nature of communities of farms, and farm communities.

I believe historical research of farms and farm economics would demonstrate that what we now call accessory on farm businesses would have been the norm for many farms. It was and is not uncommon for a farm to have a farm stand or otherwise produce and sell value-added products directly from the farm. But I believe it was also common for other businesses to take root. For example, if a farmer had blacksmithing skills or employed a blacksmith, such operations could provide an additional source of income. The same could be said for small engine or farm implement repair or even sales. One could imagine a scenario where a large animal veterinarian might also be a farmer, and thus have their clinic on the farm. Or if a farmer or member of their family had a gift for bookkeeping, they might provide those services as well. In trying to preclude the creation of non-farm businesses with a farm veneer that may operate to the detriment of rural neighbors, we should not preclude the opportunity for farmers to earn income that keeps a working farm a working farm. It is entirely possible that the farmer or farm family might earn more income from the accessory business than the farm itself, but I would argue the fundamental policy goal is to keep the working farm intact.

While I was working for Calvert County we pursued a major zoning rewrite that included provisions for accessory on farm businesses as well as agritourism, ecotourism, and heritage tourism. I think we did a good job and would encourage you to peruse the relevant provisions in the zoning ordinance. The agritourism uses and definitions are available here <https://ecode360.com/29302159Z>, and the agricultural uses and definitions are available here <https://ecode360.com/29302160Z>. I have also included a "Is Your Town Farm Friendly?" checklist from the Maine Farmland Trust for your consideration as I believe it does an exceptionally good job capturing the fuller picture of local policies that can help keep farms and farmers.

As a brief aside, in 2017 I drafted a one-pager proposing a Vermont agricultural economic development strategy when this body and the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets was once before considering AOFBs and farm viability. That is also attached for your consideration. Vermont does a lot to promote farms and farming. I would encourage the development of more detailed agricultural economic

development strategies and have included an example of those I helped develop in New York and Maryland.

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to your deliberations.